

The coloniality of distinction: Class, race and whiteness among post-crisis Italian migrants

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Simone Varriale**

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Abstract

This article explores how strategies of class distinction reproduce racialised hierarchies between ‘modern’ and ‘backward’ European populations. Drawing on 57 interviews with Italian migrants who moved to England after the 2008 economic crisis, and combining Bourdieusian class analysis and decolonial critique, the article shows that migrants in different social positions are equally concerned with claiming closeness to the UK’s meritocratic culture and with distancing themselves from Italy’s backwardness. However, they mobilise unequal forms of capital to sustain this claim. More resourceful migrants use economic and cultural capital to demonstrate fit with British culture and to racialise less resourceful co-nationals as too ‘Southern’ to belong. The latter stress self-resilience and Italianness as sources of distinction, but more frequently report exploitation and stigma in the context of insecure professional fields. The article advances research on class, racialisation and European whiteness, unravelling the *coloniality of distinction*, namely how class helps more resourceful migrants to symbolically claim North European whiteness while displacing ‘race’ – in the forms of laziness, lack of rationality and self-restraint – onto less resourceful migrants. This reveals how, in the post-2008 context, enduring narratives of South–North difference legitimise class inequalities, exploitation and neoliberal forms of self-governance.

Keywords

class, coloniality, distinction, migration, whiteness

Introduction

Since the 2008 economic crisis, a growing literature has started exploring the reactivation of South-to-North migrations within Europe (Bartolini et al., 2017; Bygnes & Erdal, 2016). This scholarship has addressed mainly graduates and high-skilled professionals

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and, despite some exceptions (Varriale, 2019), has largely ignored how class inequalities shape the biographies and subjectivities of post-crisis EU migrants. Moreover, the intersection between class and nationally specific inflections of whiteness remains a particularly neglected topic.

Focusing on Italians who moved to the West Midlands and London after 2008, this article explores how migrants mobilise different forms of capital to claim belonging to what they see as Britain's meritocratic culture and to distance themselves from Italy's backward 'mentality' (Conti, 2012). I draw on decolonial theory to trace the historical genesis of Italians' preoccupation with their country's backwardness and to explain why this preoccupation endures in the post-2008 context. I then use Bourdieu's concepts of *doxa*, capital and field to explore how migrants draw on unequal resources to symbolically climb South–North hierarchies and, implicitly, to claim North European whiteness. I define this process as the *coloniality of distinction* and explore its impact on migrants in unequal social positions.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews research on post-2008 intra-EU migration, highlighting its lack of connection with broader debates about class, race and whiteness in European migration. In the following section, I propose a theoretical bridge between decolonial theory and Bourdieusian class analysis, arguing that such a bridge unravels how class distinctions and inequalities contribute to the construction of racialised European hierarchies, a neglected topic in both migration studies and decolonial/postcolonial sociology (Bhambra, 2014), particularly in growing work on 'multiple Europes' (Boatcă, 2013). After discussing this study's methodology, I explore migrants' strategies of distinction and their coloniality, and I conclude by outlining an agenda for future research.

Situating post-crisis European migration at the intersection of race and class

Post-2008 South-to-North migrations are especially relevant to theoretical debates about hierarchies of European whiteness, as such migrations are fostered by economic and political intra-European inequalities that have cultural effects, because they inform citizens' and migrants' subjectivities (Antonucci & Varriale, 2020; Boatcă, 2013; Dzenovska, 2018).

Indeed, a growing literature in migration studies shows that South European migrants associate Northern Europe with better work opportunities, more meritocratic societies and, in the UK's case in particular, the capacity to reward individual talent and hard work (Moroşanu et al., 2019; Scotto, 2015). This cultural imaginary is entwined with a negative representation of Southern Europe as affected by corruption, nepotism, inefficient bureaucracies and a backward 'mentality' (Bartolini et al., 2017; Conti, 2012). This narrative script comparing more and less 'developed' European societies magnifies absolute cultural differences while obscuring social divisions among Southern European migrants (Varriale, 2019). Moreover, the *racialised* undertones of this narrative, and their implications for understanding migrants' subjectivities and experiences, remain ignored by the current literature.

Since this literature rarely mobilises class and race as analytical categories, it is fruitful to situate it within broader scholarship exploring how these structural inequalities shape the biographies and identities of EU migrants. Pioneering work with 'mobile'

Western Europeans explored the extent to which use of Freedom of Movement Rights is stratified by education and class background (Recchi, 2015), and how university-educated Europeans with working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds use intra-EU migration as a means of upward social mobility (Favell, 2008). This work, however, had little to say about mobile Europeans' classed, racialised and gendered identities. This emerged as a prominent topic in research with British 'lifestyle migrants', which addressed migration as a form of class distinction and explored how intersecting social divisions inform migrants' identities (Benson, 2011; Bott, 2004; O'Reilly, 2000). Although whiteness remained an implicit topic in this work, recent studies of lifestyle migration explicitly engage with whiteness studies, critical race and postcolonial theory (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018; Leonard, 2008; Lundström, 2015). These studies approach whiteness as entwined with narratives of empire and nation and, rather than defining it as an individual attribute (e.g. skin tone), they focus on the historical and contextual conditions under which being recognised as white, and as the right sort of white, gives access to material resources, social connections and symbolic recognition, such as the prestige associated with Northern European ethnicities and the invisibility that they afford vis-a-vis systemic racism (Lundström, 2015). While this work addresses how whiteness is converted into capital (and how it intersects with class and gender), research with Eastern Europeans has highlighted the contexts in which whiteness is *not* recognised as a capital, focusing on the racialisation of some Eastern European ethnicities (Fox et al., 2012), its link with experiences of downward social mobility (Krivonos, 2018), and how migrants transfer their stigma onto other racialised minorities (Fox et al., 2015; McGhee et al., 2018).

This article expands these debates on EU migrants' classed and racialised identities, discussing an under-researched group and exploring how inequalities of economic and cultural capital influence Italians' claims to North European whiteness, namely a sense of cultural affinity with the norms and values of 'England' (as participants normally refer to it). This provides an innovative contribution to intra-European migration studies, which have been less attentive to how class inequalities shape migrants' 'claims to whiteness' (Krivonos, 2018). Research with Western European migrants recognises the socially stratified nature of these populations, but aside from some exceptions (e.g. Bott, 2004), it has worked with migrants with significant cultural and economic capital (Favell, 2008; Lundström, 2015). Some research with Eastern European migrants addresses more diverse constituencies (Fox et al., 2015), but it rarely employs the concept of class as an analytical category.

In contrast to Eastern European migrants, Italians do not suffer from systemic racism in contemporary Britain (D'Angelo & Kofman, 2017), and it remains unclear if the Brexit Referendum changed this (Mazzilli & King, 2019). While Italians were racialised as non-white in the UK and US in the 19th and early 20th centuries, they became relatively 'invisible' in postwar Britain (Fortier, 2000, pp. 21–26). However, this invisibility does not shield them from anxieties about being racialised. These anxieties partly depend on participants' exposure to pre- and post-Brexit anti-immigration discourses (McGhee et al., 2018). However, as I discuss next, they also draw on a specific understanding of Italian culture vis-a-vis global hierarchies, which predates (and partly motivated) participants' experiences of migration.

Bridging decolonial critique and Bourdieu

Postcolonial and decolonial theory have long argued that distinctions between ‘modern’ and ‘backward’ societies hide racialised understandings of human populations (Bhambra, 2014), which legitimised imperialism and world capitalism in the name of European white superiority (Quijano, 2007; Virdee, 2019). They also stress that racialised hierarchies continue to influence understandings of global inequalities, even when they are not connected to former coloniser–colonised relationships and when race is not explicitly invoked but culture, nationality, ethnicity and/or religion appear as alternative explanations of absolute difference (Grosfoguel, 2004).¹ Indeed, for decolonial theorists like Mignolo (2007), invocations of ‘modernity’ remain tied to a logic of ‘coloniality’, namely to an understanding of economically ‘backward’ societies as intellectually and spiritually inferior.

The logic of coloniality also informed what Mignolo calls hierarchies of ‘imperial difference’ (2007, pp. 474–475). While European empires saw the ‘colonial other’ as less than human, from the 18th century Western European elites started seeing Southern and Eastern empires, like the Spanish and Russian ones, as ‘backward’ in time and ‘peripheral’ in space. These hierarchies of European whiteness have been documented also by the pioneering work of Gramsci on Southern Italy (1930/1991) and Todorova on the Balkans (1997). More recently, sociologists and anthropologists have used the concept of coloniality to reveal how geopolitical inequalities between Eastern and Western European regions remain legitimised via essentialist narratives of difference (Krivonos & Nare, 2019; Manolova et al., 2019) and how, in the post-2008 context, these narratives legitimised neoliberal forms of EU governance, which affected Eastern and Southern member states in particular (Antonucci & Varriale, 2020; Dzenovska, 2018). Although decolonial theory aims to dismantle the Global North’s epistemic domination over Southern and indigenous knowledges, its analytical tools can be used to investigate what Boatecă (2013) calls ‘multiple’ forms of European whiteness and how class – an under-researched topic in these debates – contributes to their construction and subjective experience.

Drawing on decolonial scholarship, it is possible to situate Italian migrants’ discourses about North European modernity and South European backwardness within a broader historical context. The idea of Italians as the ‘savages of Europe’ emerged from 18th- and 19th-century accounts of North European travellers, which associated the economic backwardness of Italy’s Southern regions with their population’s ‘passionate’ and ‘lawless’ character (Birindelli, 2018). With the consolidation of the British and French empires, the Italian peninsula and Southern Europe assumed an ambivalent representation in North European scholarly and political discourse: it was where European civilisation originated (e.g. the ancient Greco-Roman world), but it was also where, economically and culturally, Africa began (Cazzato, 2017).

These hierarchies of ‘imperial difference’ (Mignolo, 2007) significantly influenced the newborn Italian nation-state. During the Liberal and Fascist eras (1861–1914, 1922–1943), Italian political elites were concerned with distancing the nation from backward representations of the South. Colonial expansion aimed to solve the problems of mass unemployment and emigration, thus demonstrating Italy’s proper place among European powers (Choate, 2008, pp. 1–56). The project of national identity was premised on the

idea that Italians, as a population with blood ties to the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, deserved an equally glorious political and economic present (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013, pp. 21–65). As argued by Gramsci (1930/1991) and others (Conelli, 2015), this project was tied to a quasi-colonial exploitation of Southern Italian regions: while the profits of Southern agriculture contributed to the North's growing industrial sector, Southerners remained conceived as biologically inferior and hence as responsible for their own underdevelopment.

Although the postwar years were characterised by economic growth and amnesia of the colonial experience, these narratives about national identity remained alive for various structural reasons (Patriarca, 2010). Enduring regional inequalities and mass emigration sustained both the internal racialisation of Southern Italians and international debates about Italy's culture being more family-oriented and nepotistic compared to Northern Europe (Birindelli, 2018). Since 2008, notions of 'familism' and 'laziness' have been mobilised again at the EU level to explain the economic crisis in Southern Europe and to justify neoliberal remedies to it (Antonucci & Varriale, 2020; Dzenovska, 2018).

It is in this context that Italian emigration to Northern Europe reactivated. Drawing on Bourdieu, I characterise participants' understanding of South–North hierarchies as the *doxa* of Italian emigration towards Northern Europe – one that is shared by migrants with different forms of capital. For Bourdieu, *doxa* represents the 'primary experience of the social world', one that is expressed via common-sense, 'self-evident' classifications (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471). These classifications are inscribed in the habitus,² and hence depend on actors' primary (and classed) socialisation. However, the nation-state plays an equally important role in socialisation processes, as its institutions (especially the education system) provide citizens with shared common-sense narratives about their position in the world order (Reed-Danahay, 2017).

Long-standing narratives about Italians' backward mentality and Italy's peripheral position in Europe shape participants' 'self-evident' understanding of British and Italian culture, but also how they mobilise unequal resources to claim North European whiteness. It is this process, which I call the *coloniality of distinction*, that I explore in the remainder of this article. If appeals to modernity, as suggested by decolonial critique, imply a racialised Other, economic resources and education (namely economic and cultural capital) have historically represented powerful means to claim individual deservingness and displace the presumption of race onto the colonised and the poor (Skeggs, 2004). Indeed, unequal access to these resources is normally 'misrecognised' as a product of individual merit (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 389–390), while lack of these resources has been construed, in both the UK and Italy, as a product of 'degenerate' behaviours such as laziness, dishonesty and lack of intelligence (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013; Shilliam, 2018).

The historical and, to some extent, transnational overlap between essentialist discourses of class and race allows more resourceful Italian migrants to mobilise the *symbolic power*³ of class resources (degrees, economic security and professional status) to displace the presumption of Southernness onto less resourceful Italian migrants. Class distinctions thus reveal migrants' willingness to position themselves on the side of modernity (Mignolo, 2007), as racialised global hierarchies are constitutive of the ways in which Italians and other Europeans understand their place in the world (Boatcă, 2013). Less resourceful migrants are equally

concerned with escaping Southernness, but they mobilise discourses of individual self-resilience (which do not carry the symbolic power of economic and cultural capital) or highlight the ‘positive’ aspects of Italianness, namely its historical connection with the Renaissance. However, both strategies of distinction can be exploited by employers in insecure professional fields, as I show when discussing migrants who work in the hospitality sector.

Methodology

This article draws on 57 biographical interviews conducted with Italian migrants living in the West Midlands and London. The research addressed Italians who moved abroad with unequal resources, and this principle informed the construction of my theoretical sample. I recruited participants who had different educational qualifications before migration: compulsory schooling (7), vocational (17) and academic (8) diplomas, BAs (12), MAs (10) and PhDs (3). Since education is a strong proxy for family background in Italy (Romito, 2016), I used education prior to migration to capture classed differences in economic and cultural capital. I then reconstructed participants’ migrant trajectories, focusing on how they mobilised unequal resources (Erel, 2010).

The sample comprises 32 women and 25 men, ranging in age from 18 to 61 (mean age: 34). The parents of 10 participants were first-generation migrants to Italy. I did not ask any questions about national, ethnic or racial identification, as I explored how participants themselves mobilise these categories (see below). Although this is a theoretical sample, it broadly reflects the social demography annually reported by the Italian Institute of Statistics for emigration to the UK (ISTAT, 2018). This article examines the intersection of migration, class and whiteness. The impact of other divisions has been (Varriale, 2019) or will be explored in other publications.

I started the interviews with an open question about motivations for moving abroad and let participants develop their own narrative, probing for examples when needed. The interviews concluded with a discussion of everyday life in Britain and the questions ‘What do you think about post-2008 Italian emigration?’ and ‘Who are the Italians moving here?’ These questions generated forms of distinction based on inequalities of economic and cultural capital, revealing anxieties about the behaviour and reputation of ‘Other Italians’⁴ abroad.

The idea of coloniality of distinction emerged inductively while analysing transcripts with NVivo. I coded for all instances when participants discussed Other Italians or used other ethno-racial and class markers. I analysed these moments as ‘position-takings’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30), namely occasions when participants drew distinctions between themselves and others mobilising different criteria of self-worth. These position-takings reveal participants’ common-sense, *doxic* understanding of the world order (Reed-Danahay, 2017), but also classed dispositions and resources, which shape how participants position themselves vis-a-vis shared understandings of European/global hierarchies. I select excerpts from different points in participants’ interviews and not only the final questions about Italian emigration. This allows me to contextualise their distinction strategies and to further unravel their ‘schemes of perception’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 171), which become particularly manifest when participants are not asked about Other Italians, but nonetheless mobilise this and other ethno-racial classifications.

The fact that I have a Southern Italian background (and accent) possibly made some North Italian participants more careful about voicing stereotypes about Southerners' 'backwardness', but these stereotypes emerged nonetheless, as I discuss below. Class equally shaped interactions with participants: graduates manifested a sense of complicity in their mocking remarks about Italian 'waiters', while less resourceful participants sometimes emphasised their 'hard work' in defensive ways. Both groups, however, identified Other Italians, albeit through different registers.

Given the time of interviews (2016–2018), Brexit emerged as a frequent topic of discussion, and it likely made participants anxious about distinguishing themselves from 'undeserving' migrants (McGhee et al., 2018). However, discussions of Other Italians were not explicitly connected to Brexit, and, as argued above, they reveal criteria of classification with a longer, transnational historical genesis.

In line with other pieces of qualitative research, I use a select number of excerpts. My aim is to privilege analysis over description and to generate theoretical insights, rather than to report frequencies. Nonetheless, the findings reported in the first two empirical sections represent major trends in the dataset, while the individual experiences reported in the third empirical section represent a minority of vulnerable participants.

Participants had spent between three months and 10 years in Britain when interviewed. They were recruited through messages posted on Facebook groups and through snowball sampling. Interviews lasted about two hours each. I conducted the interviews in Italian and translated excerpts for this article. All identifying details have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

The coloniality of distinction among graduates and professionals

When participants with degrees and/or high-status jobs discuss Other Italian migrants, they do not simply mention economic necessity and low education, but present lack of economic and cultural capital as products of degenerate behaviour (Skeggs, 2004).

Giovanna (BA, accountant) provided a typical description of Other Italians. Initially, she compared them with asylum-seekers ('they're a tide, coming from everywhere, like they are on boats too!') and characterised them as 'asking for benefits as soon as they arrive'. Later, she suggested that 'professionals' would behave differently, thus being a better fit for the UK's culture of meritocracy:

[Italians] probably hear the same stuff everyone hears from abroad [about England]. Then they come here and realise that it's not all gold, because if you want something you have to work your ass off to get it, at least you aren't [pause] I know people who came from Italy with a job, engineers and other professionals, who came here, transferred by their companies, so it's different, and rightly so, it's a different lifestyle.

Giovanna's interview evoked different regimes of racialisation. Initially, she echoed tabloids' reports about 'floods' of asylum-seekers and migrants invading the UK (Fox et al., 2012) and suggested that some Italians might indulge in the same concerning behaviour as these other migrants (benefit scrounging). Later, she mobilised the symbolic power of

class credentials, in the form of high-status jobs and education, to distinguish the good Italians (and herself) from stigmatised migrant categories. Economic and cultural capital become proxies for Italians who will ‘work [their] ass off’, fitting with what she sees as the British ethos. Later in the interview, she also characterised Other Italians as typical Italians who bring with them expectations of nepotism:

This [Italian] girl stresses me out, she keeps asking ‘get me a position at your workplace’, but I can’t! If you can’t speak English decently they won’t even consider you.

Giovanna’s interview not only conflates Other Italian migrants and Othered migrant categories, but racialises less resourceful Italians as typical examples of Italian culture’s lawlessness.

Similarly, Alessandro (PhD student) connected Other Italians’ lack of education with problematic behaviours:

[There are] two categories: those who move to work as barmen and waiters, or people with two degrees who move for a doctorate. . . . [S]ome of my childhood friends emigrated randomly, they moved to Australia to basically pick tomatoes, but after I moved – because I moved first! But I had a degree in engineering. They didn’t finish middle school . . . and ended up working as waiters, without a visa, after their visa had expired. Then they moved back [to Italy]. Meanwhile they burned 5,000 euros in airfares.

According to Alessandro, less educated migrants engage in ‘random’ mobilities, which result in waste of economic resources and undocumented migration. Elsewhere in the interview, he mentioned the UK’s ‘meritocratic’ culture in contrast to Italy’s ‘lack of competitiveness’, but here he symbolically *fixes in place* uneducated migrants (Skeggs, 2004, p. 21), denying them the possibility of upward social mobility, which is implicit in the notion of meritocracy. Like Giovanna, he also makes a connection between less resourceful migrants and typical Italians. He introduced the example of his ‘childhood friends’ with a discussion of emigration as national ‘propaganda’:

Like many things in Italy, it’s a sort of propaganda. . . . Stories about Italian emigration are like that – ‘nothing works, everything is shit’. It’s what people want to hear, but it creates false expectations.

Alessandro presented himself as someone with the cultural capital (and hence the rationality) to discern reality from media ‘propaganda’, unlike his ‘childhood friends’, whom he saw as representative of a too emotional, typically Italian response.

Mara (MA, PGCE student) initially presented the good Italians as people who ‘are more in line with the ideology [and] mentality of Britain’. She later mobilised classed markers to describe Other Italians as lacking money, education and, as a consequence, the will to improve their condition. She also suggested that these ‘families’ are more likely to be Southern Italian:

[Other Italians] want to find a job, because perhaps they don’t have a job and understandably want to find one. They move maybe with the whole family, without the slightest idea of where

they'll end up or what they'll do. They arrive unprepared, and live like that, from day to day, however it goes. . . . I've seen many of them, from the South. . . . They are everywhere, it's an invasion, many come [to Britain] like that: 'uaaahh, vabbeehh' [she is imitating a Southern dialect], all these dialects. I'm not used to it.

Only a minority of participants connected Other Italians with Southerners; my own Southern accent might have made some participants wary about voicing these stereotypes. Nonetheless, Mara's interview reveals the historical overlap between the racialisation of Southern Italians and poor Italian families, which developed as interconnected and in relation to the colonial Other (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013). Indeed, in both Italy and the UK, poverty was 'blackened' on the basis of distinctions between rationality and emotions, self-restraint and lawlessness, which developed during colonial expansion (Shilliam, 2018). As a result, when participants mobilise the symbolic power of class, they benefit from the logic of coloniality (Mignolo, 2007). Class resources help them claim belonging to the UK's more rational and less emotional (hence modern) culture of meritocracy, while displacing Southernness and its racialised features onto less resourceful Italians. It is precisely the logic of coloniality that makes possible the slippage, in participants' discussions, between less resourceful Italians, 'typical' Italians, Southern Italians and other stigmatised migrant categories, as these different forms of racialisation are premised on similar 'essentialist ideologies of human difference' (Tyler, 2018, p. 761).

These ideas also emerged when participants tried to avoid an overly negative representation of Other Italians. Teresa (PhD, development coordinator) characterised Italians in London with the imaginary of London as a modern global city (Favell, 2008):

[Italians in London] are very tenacious. I know very few people who just get by, while I knew many of them in Berlin [where she lived for a year] They are people who work very hard, with aims – very Londoner from this perspective, I mean, *target, achieved!* [in English]

While she avoided making overly negative statements about those who 'just get by', she later characterised the good, English-behaving Italians as:

People who come from the *middle-class* [in English] and decided that they wanted to study abroad and their parents supported them, or they got a scholarship, or they put some money aside, so it's a bit of a mix. And it's the category where I recognise myself: adventurers, enthusiasts, very self-entrepreneurial.

Teresa's comments reveal a reinforcing mechanism between the *doxa* of South–North hierarchies, which misrecognises geopolitical inequalities as 'cultural' differences (Mignolo, 2007), and the *doxa* of class inequalities, which misrecognises class privilege as individual talent (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 389–390). She grants 'English' qualities like self-entrepreneurship to middle-class Italians, as if their class position was a guarantee of their individual attitudes.

Participants thus present middle-class resources as evidence of one's individual fitness for (British) modern culture, while lack of capitals is associated with race, namely Southern (and Italian) lack of self-restraint and rationality.

The coloniality of distinction among less resourceful migrants

Participants without degrees and working in low-status professional fields are equally concerned with claiming belonging to the UK and, implicitly, North European whiteness. However, they mobilise different resources to do so. Christian (vocational high school, restaurant manager) moved to London after his parents' restaurant went out of business. His emphasis on self-resilience was widespread among participants, especially men, working in hospitality:

Maybe you can see it on my face, I've basically done 11 days working 10/11/12 hours a day, and it's a different mentality, it's a challenge, and I've seen a lot of Italians coming here and getting scared, running away. People complain but here there's work, it's not like Italy, there's real work, and they [Italians] get scared and go back home. . . . I don't want to say that in Italy people do nothing, but maybe it's a bit relaxed.

For Christian, Other Italians are not characterised by lack of cultural and economic capital. They are individuals whose work ethic remains, in a sense, too Italian ('relaxed'). By contrast, affinity with British 'mentality' depends on one's capacity to sustain long, unpredictable work shifts. While a discourse of self-resilience can be mobilised by migrants in different social positions (Fox et al., 2015), it remains embedded in inequalities of capital. Christian cannot connect his 'hard work' to the symbolic power of class credentials. Moreover, the boundaries between feeling stressed out, like Christian, and feeling exploited can become especially porous in the hospitality sector, as I show in the next section.

Lorenzo (academic high school, pub manager) also discussed hard work as a purely individual disposition, which distinguishes him from the 'cursed culture' of Other Italians. Like Mara above, he sees this 'mentality' as especially strong among Southern Italians (despite being a Southerner himself):

Many [Italians] leave [England] after December or September, because they want to do Christmas and their holidays in Italy. So we still bring our cursed culture with us. I say cursed because England is a country where they work during Easter and Christmas I believe this is one of Italy's limitations, I was in Naples in August. . . . I went to the city centre for a walk and I saw . . . billions of tourists and all shops closed. The economy is in crisis and people are so arrogant that they go on holiday during the Feast of Assumption. . . . That is when you have to make more money, you have to stay open. . . . This is the Italian mentality, it's frequent in Naples but it's all over Italy.

Both Lorenzo and Christian see hard work as a particularly English quality, and they never mentioned the hospitality sector's structural insecurity in England (Alberti, 2014). Absolute cultural differences, in their statements, legitimise economic exploitation, as both participants emphasise their full compliance with the sector's market logic in order to demonstrate North European whiteness. As argued by Dzenovska (2018) in relation to Latvia's citizens, a neoliberal ethos⁵ of entrepreneurial competitiveness and individual responsibility, in the post-2008 context, has become a way of claiming 'proper' (Western) European

civility. Similarly, my participants suggested that they are fit for a modern, Northern capitalism that is incompatible with the laziness of Italian or, worse, Southern Italian culture.

Participants' appeals to 'positive' Italianness similarly reproduce absolute South–North distinctions and, as I show below, can legitimise economic exploitation. As emphasised by Enzo (compulsory education, barman), Italianness can be associated with corruption ('screwing other people') but also with superiority in 'the food and beverage sectors':

Italians abroad win because they are faster, they are much more [pause] it's difficult to describe. It's the classic thing about doing multiple things at the same time. . . . I'm not saying the classic thing about screwing other people, but being able to do this and that. . . . We win in the food and beverage sectors, we really speak a different language because we are better at cooking, more knowledgeable about drinks, we really have a different taste.

Later in the interview, Enzo connected these qualities to Italy's art history ('Italians have art, a lineage from Da Vinci, Giotto, Machiavelli, great minds that left us this quality'). This understanding of Italianness is strongly racialised, as it is premised on the idea that Italians have blood ties to Europe's mythical past: the Roman Empire and the Renaissance (Choate, 2008; Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013). However, later Enzo referred to class, via university education, as something that makes some Italians more attuned to English 'lifestyle', thus recognising the hierarchies of self-worth endorsed by more resourceful Italians:

We can't take high positions [in England] They won't give you a job in a bank, unless you've been here for 30 years or are a graduate in economics, because you don't have the same lifestyle. Italians are more like 'take it easy', 'who cares', 'we'll do that tomorrow' English people see things differently.

Although Italianness remains associated with ambivalence, as it represents both proper Europeanness ('art') and its Other ('who cares'), it is the former meaning in particular that participants invoke in discussions of Eastern European migrants, as revealed by Camilla (compulsory education, restaurant manager):

Italians have a good reputation, both among English people and other nationalities. . . . I've seen how a Romanian friend of mine gets looked at when we go out together, it's different. So Italy is somehow recognised in England, I don't know, maybe for its culture, for who we are. Because it's true, we're good people, we have a lot of things to be proud of and for which we are envied, of course.

While Camilla mentions the past achievements of Italian culture as an obvious ('of course') explanation of differential treatment, it is important to remark that Italianness's ambivalent meaning belongs to the shared *doxa* of Italian migrants, and hence can also be invoked by middle-class participants. Pierpaolo (BA, engineer) explained how he transferred his engineering skills to a new position in England in the following terms:

[Britons] probably don't have the typical flexibility of Italians. We make do, *we have little respect for the rules, but we are good at making do* [my emphasis].

What distinguishes professionals from less resourceful participants is the contexts in which they invoke Italian superiority. While Pierpaolo explains his successful migration as an outcome of nationally specific creativity, professionals (including himself) barely mention this idea in discussions of Other Italians, because these evoke anxieties about racialisation. Professionals are concerned that they might be associated with the indistinguishable ‘tide’ (Giovanna) or ‘invasion’ (Mara) of lower-class Italians, which are easily confounded with other categories of undeserving migrants. In this context, positive Italianness is not a sufficiently scarce resource, as it does not distinguish professionals from those co-nationals who might poison their reputation. By contrast, some less resourceful migrants invoke Italians’ ‘superior’ cultural achievements in the absence of other resources (Krivonos, 2018), especially in professional fields, like hospitality, where Italianness is recognised as a symbolic asset. However, this recognition can have significant costs.

The coloniality of distinction in insecure social positions

As Camilla suggested above, Italian migrants have a ‘good reputation’ in the UK. However, while being Italian can act as a form of ‘white capital’ (Lundström, 2015), protecting participants from institutional racism, Italianness is also validated within specific social contexts or ‘fields’ (Bourdieu, 1993), and in professional fields where work is more insecure and stigmatised, the validation of both Italianness and self-resilience can become entwined with experiences of exploitation, which are exacerbated by gender and age inequalities. Nonetheless, participants remain significantly committed to absolute South–North differences, reproducing the logic of coloniality.

Some participants working in restaurants and hotels were more reluctant to mobilise self-resilience as a badge of Britishness and modernity. Maria (compulsory education) spent two years taking short-term jobs. She described experiencing a growing sense of insecurity and stigma in her dealings with employment agencies:

Agencies don’t pay you; you do extra shifts . . . and they don’t pay you. . . . Then there are normal agencies like the one I work with now. They call you but then, suddenly, they let you down. Sometimes they don’t even tell you why Maybe it’s my impression, but when you go to the interviews, it’s like they don’t care. Sometimes they treat you harshly, they are rude, like you are bothering them.

These experiences led Maria to reconsider her view of England as a place where migrants can access a better way of life. Nonetheless, she still associated Northern Europe with the possibility of a ‘decent life’, and partly blamed herself for her current circumstances:

Everyone wants to come here, no one wants to go to Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway. . . . I’ve heard people make good money there. . . . [But here] you can’t have a decent life, it’s always a struggle, so much suffering, every time you ask yourself, ‘Why?’ I didn’t know it was like this, I had no idea, so it’s partly my fault, because I chose this place.

Other participants reported being treated with ‘no sense of respect’ (Lorenzo, discussed above), like ‘slaves’ (Giacomo) or ‘dirt’ (Elio) by some customers or managers. These

forms of stigma did not explicitly target participants' nationality or ethnicity (although sometimes they did). Nonetheless, they are widespread in the hospitality sector (Alberti, 2014), which relies on a high turnover of insecure, low-status migrant labour. After five years, similar experiences led Elio (vocational high school, waiter and former manager) to switch to part-time work and pursue a BA in photography (for which he took out a loan). His plan was to leave the hospitality sector on a permanent basis:

The customers drive you crazy with unreasonable requests, with manners which are quite difficult to stand, really difficult. There were many rich clients who treated you like a lord, but 90% treated you like dirt.

Later in the interview, Elio stressed that these experiences remained formative, as they taught him to be 'a good manager and a good worker'. Indeed, experiences of stigma did not necessarily change participants' perception of England as a more meritocratic country. As Elio clarified: 'if you can't find work [in London] it's because you don't like to work'.

Being Italian helped some participants get access to their first jobs (not necessarily in Italian restaurants). However, these positions frequently presented the challenges reported above. Sara's story reveals the double-edged nature of Italianness, especially when it gives access to an exploitative professional setting:

This girl from New Zealand . . . wanted to invest her money. She had good money but didn't know anything about cooking When she heard I was Italian, she took me on as a cook in her restaurant. . . . She started asking for more and more, she didn't provide me with the equipment I needed to work, the kitchen was not up to standard . . . , the floor kept developing condensation. . . . It was dangerous, but she ignored me. One day I was in a rush, fell on the floor and hit my shoulder. She didn't even come with me [to the hospital]. . . . I couldn't work for six months.

Sara was especially vulnerable to the insecurity of the hospitality sector, as she left Italy in her forties, with compulsory education and after a divorce that had left her with little economic resources. She considered that: 'unfortunately in Italy people think that we [Italian migrants] are rich, have good jobs . . . , but they don't see the backstage'. However, she still saw 'hard work' as a natural manifestation of British culture:

Here the work is very hard, as you know. I have some friends, but mostly people from work. Sometimes, when [the restaurant] close[s] earlier, we have a walk or a drink . . . , but that's it, you're here for work and to save money, which is what Italy didn't give you.

Despite severe experiences of insecurity, Sara remained committed to well-established tropes about England's 'hard work' culture and Italy's lack of meritocracy, thus legitimising antisocial and potentially exploitative working conditions.

Some participants with a higher education and a middle-class background worked as restaurant staff only on a temporary basis. Marco (BA) found his first job, like Sara, because his Italianness was recognised as valuable by a restaurant manager. He found the work 'heavy' and eventually left it to concentrate on a full-time MA. However, he

presented these tiring conditions not as personally devaluing, but as a normal manifestation of British culture:

They [Italian colleagues] told me that after a while the work tires you, and it's true, the shifts are heavy, not like in Italy, because they [English people] are focused on productivity, the *target* [in English], and so they want you to sell each day – more bottles of wine, for example.

Marco was not tied to this professional field (like Sara and others). He never considered this sector to be 'for life', as he clarified later. This allowed him to frame his colleagues' experiences as an issue of cultural differences between British and Italian ways of doing things, and to position himself on the right side of South–North hierarchies. His relative class privilege helped him to symbolically claim modernity and displace the presumption of a too-Southern mentality onto Other Italians. While less resourceful participants were equally invested in this geopolitical, racialised *doxa*, their claims of distinction were endured in unequal social positions.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in the empirical sections shows that post-2008 Italian migrants mobilise unequally-distributed class resources to claim belonging to Britain's meritocratic culture and, implicitly, North European whiteness. Graduates and professionals highlight their education and professional status to dissociate themselves from Other Italians and the Southernness they represent. Similarly, less resourceful participants invoke hard work and positive Italianness to dissociate themselves from Southern (and Eastern) European culture. Yet, in the context of insecure and low-status work, these claims legitimise a neoliberal ethos of self-resilience and exploitative working conditions, facilitating the reproduction of structural inequalities.

Although participants claim distinction using unequally-distributed resources, their strategies endorse similar ideologies of ethno-racial difference. This is what I called the *coloniality of distinction*, namely the way in which class distinctions reproduce racialised understandings of European and global hierarchies. Class markers (namely, cultural and economic capital) are markers of rationality, modernity and individuality, and hence they serve the purpose of symbolically elevating participants within ethno-racial hierarchies. Claims of 'hard work' similarly highlight individual merit, but they are not sustained by institutionally recognised resources (such as degrees, high-status jobs and money) and expose vulnerable participants to the risks of physical and mental exhaustion. Positive Italianness appears to afford a significant degree of white privilege vis-a-vis stigmatised minorities, but it cannot shield less resourceful participants from class disadvantage and economic exploitation. These are the mechanisms through which class distinctions reproduce the logic of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo, 2007) and its common-sense assumptions (or *doxa*). It comes with little surprise that some participants also claim distinction vis-a-vis Southern Italians, as the latter's racialisation is premised on the same European history of ethno-racial essentialism and exclusion.

To be sure, the racialised anxieties explored in this article cannot be explained solely by experiences of economic hardship or downward social mobility (Krivonos, 2018),

which remain uncommon among participants. Italians' anxieties need to be located within the racialised imaginary that oriented their migration, namely a narrative of Southern backwardness that the post-2008 crisis re-awakened, but did not create from scratch. This explains why, despite their relative invisibility in Britain, Italians continue to distance themselves from Southernness and, sometimes, from other categories of 'undeserving' migration. The perception of an 'invasion' of Italians moving to England, due to its popularity as a destination after 2008 (ISTAT, 2018), further accentuates participants' racialised anxieties, making class an especially valuable source of distinction.

The article provides an innovative theoretical and empirical contribution to postcolonial/decolonial sociology and to growing work on 'unequal' and 'multiple' Europes (Antonucci & Varriale, 2020; Boatcă, 2013), which has not analysed how class contributes to the construction of European whiteness. The concept of *coloniality of distinction* unravels how economic and cultural capital make some migrants (and citizens) better positioned to claim proper Europeanness, and it foregrounds how racialised European hierarchies are experienced by migrants with unequal resources and embedded in different social fields. The article also situates Italy and Italian emigration within debates about coloniality, whiteness and migration that so far have focused on Northern, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Finally, the article opens up possibilities for further dialogue between decolonial/postcolonial sociology and Bourdieusian sociology. Future work should explore who is less likely to benefit from using cultural and economic capital as markers of rationality, modernity and individuality, and hence how the *coloniality of distinction* manifests among migrants (and citizens) racialised as non-white and as not white enough. How this process intersects with gender and legal status, and how it manifests in different regional, national and local contexts, are equally important areas for future work, given the world-system inequalities in which race, class and other divisions remain embedded.

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Notes

1. This is the definition of 'racialisation' I use in this article, which follows decolonial theory (Grosfoguel, 2004).
2. Habitus is a set of structured, embodied dispositions that structures individuals' social practices within various social fields. Doxic schemes of perception are an integral part of individuals' habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 170–172).

3. 'Symbolic power' indicates the prestige associated with individual possession of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291).
4. I use Other Italians (rather than other Italians) because this is a recurrent trope in participants' position-takings, which reveals a process of Othering.
5. I define 'neoliberalism' as practices and discourses that reshape different social fields according to market rationalities, promoting entrepreneurial, self-responsible subjectivities (Tyler, 2015, pp. 505–506).

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